FRENCH CREEK II PROJECT

PALS 58343, 6/19/2020

PROPOSED ACTION

Proposed Project Location the French Creek II project area is located ~ 10 miles north of Berry Creek, CA at elevations ranging between 2,300 and 4,500 feet. Annual precipitation ranges between 55 and 70 inches. Most of the area is comprised of Sierra mixed conifer consisting of white fir, Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, sugar pine, incense cedar, red fir, California black oak, big leaf maple, tan oak, and Pacific madrone. Most of the lower elevation stands and south facing slopes are pine dominated mixed conifer while higher elevation stands and north facing slopes are mostly fir dominated mixed conifer. Pine species are mostly restricted to the overstory with limited regeneration due to overcrowding by white fir and in some cases, Douglas-fir. Red fir is mixed with white fir at the highest elevations of the project area. French Cree II covers the northeastern and higher elevation areas.

The Camp Fire (November 8-25, 2018) burned through a majority of the proposed project acres but mostly at low severity. Moderate and high severity acres were removed from the French Creek project and are currently being salvage logged with the Big Bar project.

Proposed Action the French Creek II project proposes to reduce stand density and hazardous fuels through commercial and pre-commercial thinning, mastication of brush and prescribed burning. Ponderosa pine plantations will be thinned to low densities emphasizing stand and species variability. Mixed conifer stands will be thinned but retain relatively higher stocking, especially in California spotted owl habitat, but emphasize density reduction in high-density fir-dominated mixed conifer and white fir stands, California black oak release, a reduction in shade tolerant tree species, and removing smaller diameter trees from the understory. Residual stands will be more open, increasing the amount of available soil moisture and sunlight for individual trees and reducing the risk of tree mortality and high severity wildfire. We will treat no more than 3,000 acres by:

- Mechanical Thinning, TM commercial thin general forest to remove sawlog-sized trees ranging from 10.0 to 30.0 inches dbh limit. Cut tree mark using GTR 220 concepts to reduce existing canopy by no more than 30%, Biomass, Service Work, and Maintenance.
- Mechanical Thinning, HRCA, TM commercial thin HRCA to remove sawlog-sized trees ranging from 10.0 to 30.0 inches dbh limit. Cut tree mark using GTR 220 concepts to reduce existing canopy by no more than 30%, reduce canopy to no less than 50%, Biomass, Service Work, and Maintenance.
- Mechanical Thinning, True Fir Special, TM commercial thin to remove sawlog-sized trees ranging from 10.0 to 30.0 inches dbh limit. Variable density thin using GTR 220 concepts to target true fir, leaving ponderosa, Jeffrey, and sugar pine, some incense cedar, and release California black oak and other canopy providing hard woods. Look for gap

opportunities. In CSO HRCA retain a minimum 50% canopy cover. Maintain a limited operating period. Biomass, Service Work, and Maintenance.

- Plantation Thinning mechanical thinning (commercial, TM or non-commercial, BM or FN) of pole to small tree-sized plantations that are not suitable owl habitat. Thin plantations to a range of 60 to 120 square feet/acre creating spatial heterogeneity and enhancing conditions for other tree species. Biomass, Service Work, and Maintenance.
- Species Habitat Improvements, TM, HI commercial thinning to remove sawlog-sized trees ranging from 10.0 to xx.0 inches dbh limit. Cut tree mark using GTR 220 concepts to maintain a minimum retained canopy cover of xx% averaged across stand. Emphasize black oak release. Biomass, Service Work, and Maintenance.
- Roadside Hazard along roadsides, remove dead or dying trees, dead parts of live trees, or unstable trees that are likely to fail in the near future and are within striking distance of people, facilities, or roads, following Angwin et al. 2012. In CSO PAC, hazard tree removal will be restricted to failure potential 4 (tree is dead) and 3 (high potential for failure). No sawlog diameter limits for hazard tree removal Service Work and Maintenance.
- Biomass, BM material up to 15.0 inches dbh may be treated by biomass. If there is a market material can be chipped and hauled to market. Otherwise material can be chipped on site, hauled to landing to be chipped and scattered or grapple-piled and pile burned.
- Service Work, FN use hand cut pile and burn, hand cut grapple pile and burn, Biomass, chip, mastication, targeted grazing, or Prescribed Fire treatments to effect primary stand treatments.
- Service Work in PAC, FN, HI in CSO PAC maintain a LOP, prohibiting vegetation treatments within approximately ¼ mile of the activity center during breeding season (March 1 – August 15), unless survey confirms CSO are not nesting. Design to maintain habitat structure and function.
- Prescribed Fire prioritize acres for burning and design treatments that maximize the use of fire to achieve desired conditions.
- Maintenance, FN (all project acres) hand cutting, hand- and/or grapple-piling, Biomass, chip, mastication, targeted grazing, and Prescribed Fire as needed on multiple entries over the next 30 years to maintain desired conditions.

During project planning we will opportunities for watershed improvements that can include meadow restoration, road work, trail work, and other restoration activities.

- Watershed Improvements, WC aquatic organism passage restored (culverts fixed or replaced), maintained and/or storm-proofed roads, upgraded or fixed roads or trails, improved stream crossings, meadow restoration, revegetated with native species.
- Road Improvements, RI activities that result in an increase of an existing road's traffic service level, expands its capacity, or changes its original design function.
- Road Maintenance, RD the ongoing upkeep of a road necessary to retain or restore the road to the approved road management objective. Road maintenance may include brushing, blading, signing, surfacing, and drainage repairs.

- Road Stormproofing activities that stabilize or stormproof by adding or improving drainage features for anticipated increased runoff on open or seasonally open roads. This could include critical dips, rolling dips, dips with leadoff ditches, outsloping, replacing or upgrading culverts, and improving stream crossings.
- Trail Decommissioning activities that result in the stabilization and restoration of unneeded trails to a more natural state.
- Trail Realignment activities that result in a new location of an existing trail or portions of an existing trail and treatment of the old trailway.
- Trail Stormproofing is trail stabilization or stormproofing that adds or improves drainage features for anticipated increased runoff on open or seasonally open trails.

Purpose of Action most of the forested areas in the French Creek project area are in an overstocked condition and some experienced an elevated level of tree mortality caused by bark beetles during the recent drought from 2014 to 2016. In addition to being overly dense, these areas have a history of tree mortality during drought resulting in heavy fuel loads and higher risk of stand replacing wildfire. Thinning and prescribed fire are highly recommended throughout the project area to reduce tree density and surface and ladder fuels levels.

Need for Action section 605 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) establishes a categorical exclusion for hazardous fuels reduction projects on National Forest System lands. A hazardous fuels reduction project may be categorically excluded under this authority that is designed to maximize the retention of large trees, to the extent that the trees promote stands that are resilient to insects and disease, and reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, wildfires.

Collaborative Development Process on May 9, 2019, 10 representatives of local government, environmental organizations, industry, and the Forest Service visited the project area as part of a field trip of the Feather River Ranger District (FRRD) Collaborative to tour National Forest System lands in the Camp Fire area. The project was introduced at the field trip site and later that evening at the quarterly meeting of the FRRD Collaborative.

The Butte County Forest Advisory Committee was briefed on the project June 22, 2020 at their monthly meeting.

The FRRD interdisciplinary team (IDT) met May 29, 2019, along with collaborators representing Butte County Fire Safe Council, Butte County Forest Advisory Committee, Sierra Forest Legacy, and Sierra Pacific Industries to approve a project area and propose stand-by-stand prescriptions.

The project was entered into PALS and appeared on the Schedule Of Proposed Actions (SOPA) on June 19, 2020. On June 19, we sent a project description and invitation for scoping to 132 collaborators representing Federal, Tribal, State, and local governments, non-government organizations, industry, education, utilities, and members of the public. The project is anticipated to have a decision in February, 2021. Please provide any comments to Jason Vermillion, Jason.vermillion@usda.gov or Clay Davis, clay.davis@usda.gov .